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Priest, Writer, Mentor, Misfit

Understanding Henri Nouwen

Michael W. Higgins December 5, 2016 - 11:01am 0 comments

Two decades ago, on September 21, 1996, while on the way to St. Petersburg to shoot a documentary based on his acclaimed spiritual meditation, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Henri Nouwen—priest, writer, professor, and pastoral mentor—died of a heart attack in his homeland of the Netherlands. His friends and countless admirers were stunned. Prolific author of more than three dozen books, and a much-called-upon speaker and preacher, Nouwen was a large presence in Catholic circles and a growing influence in Protestant ones as well. His loss was felt not only in his immediate community but around the world.

I knew Nouwen slightly, having had two memorable personal interactions with him in the 1980s. Asked to establish an adult education and pastoral information structure at my new university (St. Jerome's in Ontario), I was seeking an inaugural speaker for the opening of the university's Centre for Catholic Experience when my dean, Peter Naus, suggested his close friend Henri Nouwen, then a professor at Harvard Divinity School. Though my awareness of Nouwen was limited to his early book, *Thomas Merton, Contemplative Critic*, which I had found superficial, I did not demur; after all, I was untenured, new on campus, and the dean was Nouwen's friend and a big name to boot, so it seemed a good thing to do.

And it was. Nouwen's address—a dramatized homily titled "The Spirituality of Peace-Making"—was informative, skillfully constructed, and masterfully delivered. But what most impressed me was his request, prior to his talk, to spend some time in our chapel. The interval of prayer and solitude set a tone, a disposition, that flowed into Nouwen's presentation in the packed hall. He asked the gathered multitude to join him for several minutes of Taizé hymns, after which—moving about the dais with awkward strides—he spoke with the passion of a televangelist, eschewing academic jargon, delighting in the anecdotal, and not once referring to a text. It was performance art, and he was very good at it.

Many in the crowd were "groupies," for whom anything Nouwen said was nectar. Others were Mennonites intrigued by the "peace-making" dimension of his title. Still others were clergy unsure of his orthodoxy, or students attending as a class assignment. The most skeptical listeners were any number of

professors unpersuaded that Nouwen was a serious scholar—refreshingly unconventional, yes, but lightweight and not really suited to a university setting. For my part, while the good opinion of my senior colleagues mattered to me, I could not but be impressed by a speaker who held a big audience enthralled for seventy-five minutes.

My second encounter with Nouwen occurred on the occasion of the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary of Dean Naus and his wife Anke, both of whom traced their friendship with him back to Nijmegen University in Holland. Nouwen had witnessed their marriage and later baptized their three sons, and now he led a festive and sacramental celebration of their anniversary. I was struck by Nouwen's awkwardness in the moments when he wasn't presiding ritually, and realized how shy he was, an introvert in an extrovert's clothing. At one point in the evening, he found his way to my table and planted himself beside me. Looking at me with an unnerving intensity, he launched into a series of questions about who I was and what I thought—a raft of existential queries, almost an interrogation, that clashed with the evening's festive mood. I responded tentatively, and felt relieved when he moved on to zero in on someone else.

I mention these two instances because they illustrate the richly faceted dimensions of Henri Nouwen, a Pierrot-like figure with many masks: a solo artist and yet needy companion; a man born for the stage and yet deeply unsure of his own authenticity; a marvel and a misfit; a Joseph with a many-colored dreamcoat. In his ability to turn personal vulnerability into spiritual exploration lies the broad appeal his writing made—and continues to make ^[1]—to his devoted readers. Nouwen addressed other people's pain by nakedly sharing his own; he spoke of our "woundedness" because he knew what that meant in very personal and even visceral terms. Whether counseling students, attending to the sick and the dying, or comforting the despairing, Nouwen drew from the well of his own anguish. He saw in his own pain a conduit of grace, a generative source of compassion and ground of human solidarity, an opening to heal others. "What to do," he wrote, "with this inner wound that is so easily touched and starts bleeding again?"

It is such a familiar wound. It has been with me for many years. I don't think this wound—this immense need for affection and this immense fear of rejection—will ever go away. It is here to stay, but maybe for a good reason. Perhaps it is a gateway to my salvation, a door to glory, and a passage to freedom.

BORN IN Nijkerk, Holland, in 1932, Nouwen was the eldest of four children. Especially close to his mother, Maria, he proved deeply pious, and resolved to be a priest at an early age. Educated at the minor seminary at Apledoorn and the major seminary at Rijsemburg, he was ordained a priest of the Archdiocese of Utrecht in 1957.

Postwar Holland, deeply damaged by the Nazi occupation, had managed to recover much of its energy and prosperity, and the highly stratified Dutch society that flourished for centuries—a Catholic entity paralleled with a Protestant one, in which discrete religio-politico-social realities coexisted—had been restored as well. Jurjen Beumer, author of *Henri Nouwen: A Restless Seeking for God* ^[2], writes that the 1950s in the Netherlands “were industrious years, but they were also very traditional.”

Norms and values, traditions and customs, all reverted to their proper places, both in the church and in society. In contrast to what many had hoped for during the war years, the political and religious establishment tried to return to conditions as they had existed before the war. The confessional pillars—Roman Catholicism and Protestant Christianity—were rebuilt as if there had been *no* war. Everyone fell back into the same familiar camp.

This is the confessional orbit in which Nouwen was educated for priestly ministry, in which he was ordained, and which shaped his theological outlook. All the more surprising, then, that he should choose to study the social sciences—psychology, in particular—rather than accept his ordinary’s request that he study one of the sacred sciences in Rome. Nouwen was deeply conservative, and while by no means an intellectual pioneer, he was curious, keen on knowing more about human motivation and the role of the affective in our lives; and if not dissatisfied with, he was at least cognizant of, the limitations of his seminary training. And so he asked the man who ordained him, Cardinal Bernard Alfrink, for permission to do graduate work at the Catholic University of Nijmegen.

At Nijmegen Nouwen was introduced to phenomenological psychology, an approach that appealed to his immense capacity for empathy, and would define his approach to spiritual writing, interlacing Scripture and prayer with psychological insight and practice. Peter Naus, who was his classmate and shared his interest in phenomenology, recalled that

Henri understood the motto of phenomenology—“go back to the thing itself”—as a summons to retrieve, relive, the original experience.... He thinks and feels as a phenomenologist and not as a behaviorist; as a clinical psychologist

he was trained to get into the experience of the patient. To the degree that he was successful in mapping out that experience from the inside, he was able to allow his readers to discover, to recognize, themselves.

In time Nouwen would make another request of Alfrink—to seek a two-year residency at the Menninger Clinic for Religion and Psychiatric Research in Topeka, Kansas. While in the United States he would devour the work of the Presbyterian minister and innovative psychologist Anton Boisen, whose notion that every client is a “living human document” and whose application of the case method in pastoral education—deploying one’s own personal wounds as an opening to healing and integration—had a profound impact on Nouwen’s thinking.

Invited after his Menninger fellowship to join the newly established Department of Psychology at the University of Notre Dame, Nouwen began an association with American higher education that would last the next two decades. After a short return to Holland, where he pursued an advanced degree in theology, Nouwen was back in the United States, teaching at Yale Divinity School, where he would remain for ten years before taking up a much shorter tenure at Harvard Divinity School. He would also teach at Boston College and at Regis College in the Toronto School of Theology.

Over these years Nouwen became a seasoned and much sought-after academic. But at root he was not an academic at all: although he enrolled in two doctoral programs, he never completed the work; and although a prolific writer, he was at heart a popularizer, bypassing scholarly publications to write for a non-professional audience. Students, in large numbers, enrolled in his classes; doctoral candidates sought his mentorship and counsel; and he found the rhythm of university life conducive to writing. But he was never entirely at home there. The highly specialized focus and intellectual detachment of the professional academician discouraged him, and the institutional indifference to pastoral and spiritual formation dismayed him. In *Lifesigns: Intimacy, Fecundity, Ecstasy in Christian Perspective* [3], he lamented the university’s emphasis on competition and ambition, the way it turned what should be a school of love into a school for success. As an indication of how uncomfortably the mantle of the academic sat on Nouwen’s shoulders, one need only glance at the requirements for his popular course on the spiritual life and spiritual direction, a course he taught at several institutions. The syllabus he used for the Harvard version requested “faithful presence in all class and small group meetings,” and went on to specify:

The primary emphasis will not be on information but on formation; the assignment will be to write a commentary or diary on the Gospel According to Luke; the spiritual commentary or diary will be read by at least three persons; the small groups will have a composition of no more than eight and will meet once a week for ninety minutes; an extensive bibliography will be provided consisting of Spiritual Direction, Western Mysticism, Eastern Christian Spirituality, and Ignatian Spirituality; but only Luke will be required reading; every class member should have a spiritual friend but not drawn from the class itself; no grade will be given.

It's not exactly your standard course description, and it implies what Nouwen found lacking in standard college teaching. In a frank letter to students who took a condensed version of the course at Boston College, he reflected on his departure from Harvard and the special affirmation he came to feel at the Jesuit institution:

As some of you might know, my semester at Harvard Divinity School had not been easy for me and had led me to the decision that, in order to remain faithful to my vocation, I had to leave Harvard Divinity School and look in new directions. This decision did not come without moments of self-doubt and depression. Against this background, our time together at Boston College was a real healing experience.

Nouwen's disenchantment with university life was partly attributable to his innate and persistent restlessness. That restlessness led him to experiment with vocations. He was postmodern in his disregard for boundaries, even though his efforts to define new directions spurred an habitual mixture of anxiety, self-scrutiny, and even self-reproach. Yet his venturesome and questing imagination propelled him forward. Three years into his Yale professorship, and partly in an attempt to implement the wisdom of his spiritual father, the psychiatrist-abbot John Eudes Bamberger, he headed north to the Trappist Abbey of the Genesee near Rochester, New York, for a seven-month sabbatical. His goal was to explore contemplative terrain while maintaining a journal—*The Genesee Diary: Report from a Trappist Monastery* ^[4]—that sought to emulate Thomas Merton's *Sign of Jonas*. The *Diary* lacks Merton's polished literary style and broad learning. But it underscores with arresting immediacy Nouwen's conflicted personality and his struggle to balance the contraries of his life: solitude and community; silence and communication; labor and stillness.

At the end of his stay in the monastery, Nouwen confessed that some of his goals had eluded him, including his hope that "my restlessness would turn into

quietude, my tensions into a peaceful life-style, and my many ambiguities and ambivalences into a single-minded commitment to God.” This disappointment did not prevent him from revisiting the monastery for a second sabbatical in 1979, the fruits of which were published as *A Cry for Mercy: Prayers from the Genesee* [5], a compilation of anguished implorings and poignant self-disclosures that possess something of the tone and timbre of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “terrible sonnets,” those poems of exquisite pain and darkness. Nouwen would write that “my whole being seemed to be invaded by fear. No peace, no rest; just plain fear: fear of mental breakdown, fear of living the wrong life.” And he would ask: “Am I doomed to die on the wrong side of the abyss? Am I destined to excite others to reach the promised land while remaining unable to enter?” Such disquieting questions hint at dark cliffs of despair.

AFTER STEPPING down from his position at Yale in 1981, Nouwen began another quest for a meaningful ministry, in yet another effort to quell his inner disquiet. This time it wouldn’t be a monastery—Bamberger had discouraged his romantic thinking about the cloistered contemplative life—but a displacement more radical, more fraught with personal risk, and more turbulent than any he had yet tried. From October 1981 to March 1982 Nouwen lived and worked in Bolivia and Peru as a guest of the Maryknoll community. His time there was profoundly unsettling and forced him to reexamine his understanding of evangelization, poverty, ecclesiology, and social justice. He was, to use the language of liberationists and educators, *conscientized*.

Though he already possessed a sharp sensitivity to justice issues (years before, at the Menninger Clinic and new to the United States, he had driven to Alabama to participate in the Selma civil-rights march), the visceral quality of his new experience left him both reeling and inspired—a classic Nouwen response. The political insecurity, economic disparity, military menace, and *barrio* hopelessness that became his daily diet as a novice missionary underscored both his personal feelings of inadequacy and his awareness of the difficulty any outsider faced in trying to effect change. But he was resolved to learn, attend to the aspirations and despair of his new congregants, and absorb both the pains and joys of the local culture and its people.

Nouwen’s Latin American journal, *Gracias* [6], meticulously records his impressions, his insights, and his emotional tumult. Visiting the Museum of the Inquisition in Lima, with its bloody history of torture and oppression, he sees

“a powerful reminder of how quickly we human beings are ready to torture each other and to do so often in the preposterous assumption that we are acting in the name of God,” commenting further that this “can only be a reason for repentance and humble confession and a constant reminder that what we now condemn with strong voices was an intimate part of the church’s daily life only two centuries ago.” He excoriates a devotional history that he finds reprehensible, legacy of a self-lacerating Spanish spirituality imported to the New World with the Conquistadores and their zealous friars. Escorting American friends around Lima churches, he is appalled by the detailed, often surgical, depictions of the suffering Christ. One friend is so repulsed by the blood-spattered horrors that she leaves to wait outside, but Nouwen dives further in, asserting in his journal that “the nearly exclusive emphasis on the tortured body of Christ strikes me as a perversion of the Good News into a morbid story that intimidates, frightens, and even subdues people but does not liberate them.” Then, typically, he proceeds to interrogate himself: “I wonder how much of this has been part of my own religious history, although more subtly. Maybe deep in my psyche I too know more about the deformed Jesus than about the risen Christ.”

Concluding that the conventional Christ of his Dutch seminary training and the Jansenist-tinged spirituality of his homeland had diminished his Christology, Nouwen sought greater understanding of the Jesus of the liberation theologians, and came away armed with a new awareness of the fecundity of thought and spirituality in Latin America. The onsite student of liberation theology became sensitized to regional political turbulences and their genesis, and familiar with such key concepts as the *comunidades de base*, the preferential option for the poor, and the centrality of such biblical texts as the Exodus and the Magnificat. Meanwhile, even as he assayed the world’s evils, Nouwen continued to war with his own demons of depression, self-loathing, and loneliness. His diary records his sense of himself as “an outsider, someone who doesn’t have a home, who is tolerated by his surroundings, but not accepted, liked but not loved,...a stuttering, superfluous presence.” One especially striking entry, in February 1982, observes that “every time I slip into another depression, I notice that I have given up the struggle to find God and have fallen back into an attitude of spiteful waiting.”

Finishing his sojourn in Latin America (he would return briefly to Guatemala to spend time with a priest-friend, John Vesey, who had replaced a murdered missionary, an experience that inspired *Love in a Fearful Land*, his eloquent tribute to a suffering people and their brave pastor), Nouwen settled back into the academy. Well aware that his gifts as a missionary were modest, and

unable to learn Spanish despite his fluency in Dutch, English, and German, he sagely concluded that “if I have any vocation in Latin America, it is the vocation to receive from the people the gifts they have to bring us and to bring these gifts back up north for our own conversion and healing.”

The last vocational phase of Nouwen’s life saw him serve as co-worker, pastor, and chaplain for Daybreak, the Toronto-based L’Arche home. He undertook his new duties with the customary mixed feelings of inadequacy and dread, curiosity and hope. It was here, however, among the mentally challenged, the emotionally handicapped, and the marginalized, that Nouwen would at last find a place to still his heart, a spiritual oasis he could call home. He would remain a member of the community for his final decade of life. It was a fertile time for him, with a cascade of books, speaking engagements, visits, and new friendships; but it was also the period of his most acute emotional breakdown, a crisis that had been building for years and reached its crescendo in Toronto.

Nouwen was gay, and it was a source of anguish for him. A product of a culture and time—to say nothing of an ecclesiastical regime—that engaged in collective denial around homoerotic desires, he was also personally passionate and theologically conservative: in short, an emotional breakdown just waiting for a trigger. That trigger came in the form of a friendship with a L’Arche co-worker toward whom Nouwen felt a suppressed sexual feeling, an attachment that grew from an infatuation and demanded more. As he wrote in the diary that would become *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom*:

This deeply satisfying friendship became the road to my anguish, because I soon discovered that the enormous space that had been opened for me could not be filled by the one who had opened it. I became possessive, needy, and dependent, and when the friendship finally had to be interrupted, I fell apart.

Caught in an emotional maelstrom that reduced him to a shattered state, with outbursts of uncontrollable sobbing, he fought for inner calm and resolutely set about putting the blocks of his life back together again. The friendship couldn’t be what Nouwen needed it to be; it had to be recalibrated, and in time it was. Out of the morass of conflicting feelings, and via several months of intensive therapy, emerged a healthier if still fragile Nouwen. And once again, his personal crisis informed his writing. Through this at times devastating chain of events, Nouwen lived the paschal cycle, as he so often did in his life.

The many vocations of Henri Nouwen were his way of channeling his energy to maximize the good he could do. They were a mark of his restlessness, his muddled and messy compulsion to serve the Word; and also of his pioneering pastoral imagination. Nouwen wrote in his posthumously published *Sabbatical Journey: A Diary of His Final Year* [7]: “I am convinced that it is possible to live the wounds of the past not as gaping abysses that cannot be filled and therefore keep threatening us, but as gateways to new life.” He would be the wounded healer, for others as well as for himself.

NOUWEN'S LEGACY as a writer includes scores of books and translations, and thousands of letters. He could be sentimental, cloying, and crushingly needy, as in his “letter” to journalist Fred Bratman, *Life of the Beloved*, where his penchant for labored expressions of affection is in abundant evidence (“Deep friendship is a calling forth of each other’s chosenness...our lives are unique stones in the mosaic of human existence”). But he could also be measured, penetratingly observant, and on occasion luminous, as in the epilogue to *The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey*, reflecting on the seeming capriciousness of God’s grace: “It is dark agony. It is following Jesus to a completely unknown place. It is being emptied out on the cross and having to wait for new life in naked faith.”

One struggles to place Nouwen. Theologians have difficulty situating him within one of the organic spiritual traditions. Catholic intellectuals see him as a cult figure, the darling of suburban matrons. Psychologists have reservations about his methodology and academic pedigree. And pedagogues find his inspirational teaching style problematic. But his readers—and there are legions of them, including Hillary Clinton, who cites him as a chief spiritual influence—love him unconditionally. Some of his books, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* [8] principal among them, will have lasting power; and for those who met him, listened to him preach, or became his disciples, the effect of his life and ministry has proved ineradicable.

In this twentieth anniversary of his death, it is instructive to see him in a new light, as postconciliar prophet of a reformed presbyteral model. Nouwen was a universal pastor, uninterested in the squabbles of ambitious clerical careerists, detached from the more toxic of ecclesiastical controversies, and committed to prayer as the only antidote to priestly irrelevance. His frankness around issues of sexuality and his willingness to disclose emotional fragility make him important at a time when many bishops promote a discredited neo-Tridentine model of formation. Nouwen was a loyal, integrated, and doctrinally

conservative priest. With his openness and undisguised vulnerability, the model of formation he exemplifies will set a mature standard for contemporary ministry.

In the end that may prove the final and most significant of his vocations. Nouwen liked to quip that the initials “J. M.” of Henri J. M. Nouwen meant “Just Me.” A generous dollop of Just Henri in this Bergoglio pontificate would be a great anniversary gift to the church. If we dare.

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[7] <https://www.amazon.com/Sabbatical-Journey-Diary-Final-Year/dp/0824518780>

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